

The Waves of Life

by Rae94

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Summary: How do two people who are so different find themselves drawn to one another? This takes place in the early days of Valka and Stoick's relationship. Before he became chief, before her loyalties changed, they each found something in the other worth clinging to. (Will eventually be five to six chapters long. Title may change.)

1. The First Cut

**I'm back! Here is my take on the beginning of Stoick and Valka's relationship. Hope you all enjoy. :) **

I anticipate this story being about five or six chapters long, all told. I will try to update weekly.

* * *

><p>Chapter 1: The First Cut

In the midst of the shouting, the roaring, the crackling of torches, Stoick stumbled into the Healer's lodge. His right arm clutched to his side, he groped in the low light. Sweeping his good arm desperately back and forth, he could hear the clatter of various instruments and vessels toppling to the floor, and he swore through gritted teeth. Finally, his hand closed on a roll of soft linen, and he set to work clumsily wrapping his bloodied forearm, letting out a hiss of pain or a curse occasionally as he went. He was tying off the end of the bandage and was just about to rip it from the remaining roll when a voice rang out from the doorway.

"And just what do you think you're doing?"

With the beacons shining behind, he could only make out the speaker's silhouette, slight and tall and obviously female, and the glow of her

auburn hair as firelight bounced off of the top of her head.

"Just taking care of a scratch," he responded. "Sorry about the mess. I'll come back and help you clean it up as soon as I put a stop to this attack." He made for the door, but she extended her arms to block him.

"Let me see," she demanded.

Stoick couldn't help but let out a short laugh at her attempt to stop him. He was easily twice her size and bound in muscle where she was lean. There was no way in Hel she was going to keep him from leaving by force.

"I give you my word: I'll be back."

"And I give you mine: you're not leaving until I've had a look at your arm."

He drew himself up to his full height, as was his habit when someone stood in his way. "Do you know who I am?"

"Aye, and you won't be of any use to your father or his warriors with your hammer-arm all cut up! Now let. Me. See." Her tone was firm. Her gaze never wavered. Although she was at least a head shorter than he was, Stoick felt like a child scolded by his mother, whom he knew to be right.

He supposed it couldn't hurt to let her look.

Without a word, he backed into the lodge. The young woman hastily lit a few lamps, and for the first time, he got a good look at her face. It was heart-shaped and longish, with a straight and sloping nose that ended with a slightly turned-up tip. Her skin was smooth, and Stoick saw now that she was a great deal younger than she sounded. Her eyes were green—"no, blue"—he couldn't tell in the flickering light. Her mouth was closed, lips tight as a bowstring, which was fitting considering how she had just let her words fly at him like arrows. They hit their mark unerringly.

She gestured to a bench, and Stoick sat. After rinsing her hands in a basin of water, she pulled up a stool on his right side and he extended his arm to her. His face was a rictus of pain, but he tried to arrange it in a look of determined defiance. With expert fingers, she began to unwrap his bunched bandage, and he pretended not to hear her snort nor see her smirk at his awful attempt to staunch the flow of blood.

When she finally uncovered the wound, her face betrayed no surprise. Neither did her voice as she spoke her verdict.

"It will need sutures." She stood immediately to gather the necessary supplies from where they laid on the floor.

Stoick groaned in frustration. "Can't this wait?"

"No, it can't. It's far too deep. And I'll need to mix a poultice to stave off infection."

"That will take too much time," he protested. "They need me out there

now."

"This tribe got along just fine before you came along, and they'll get along fine once you're gone. Which will be a whole lot sooner than necessary unless I get this done now."

"How do I know you're not some over-eager apprentice just wanting to look like the hero?" Stoick pointed out. "Where's your mistress? I want her opinion first."

"She's tending to two nasty concussions and three burns by a collapsed catapult. But by all means, let me bring her over here to deal with what you so obviously believe to be a scratch." She wielded her sarcasm like a practiced swordswoman.

Already, he could hear the sounds of wings flapping in retreat, and some celebratory shouting arose from the plaza.

"Oh, would you listen to that?" she said, putting a hand up to her ear and cocking her head comically. "It seems that people can manage without you for five minutes. And now we have plenty of time to do this right." She handed him a large, brimming mug of ale. "Down that quickly, please. The gods know you can."

Stoick scoffed at her comment and remarked, "Your bedside manner needs some work," before downing the liquid in a trice.

She ignored him haughtily as she pulled up a small table and laid out her equipment. He heard the slosh of a bowl of water as she placed it down, and she uttered low, "This is going to sting a bit."

He chuckled at her maternal warning, but found his laughter cut off in a hiss as a sharp sensation ran up his arm.

She glanced quickly up at him. "I told you."

He merely looked away sulkily. As she continued to clean, he set his jaw against the pain. He decided that he needed some distraction from the feeling.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Valka."

"I'm Stoick."

"I know." Her voice was terse, revealing an ego still smarting from his comments.

"I'd say nice to meet you, but under the circumstancesâ€¦" A short laugh like a hum issued from her drawn lips. When she didn't respond, he spoke again.

"I'm sorry I was so stubborn there."

"Oh, it's just another day at work for me," Valka said, waving off his apology. "Everyone is always coming in, 'Oh, it's only a little cut, gimme a bandage and I'll go,' no one wanting to admit they might actually need some serious help. Mulish, the lot of them."

"Well, there's the pot calling the kettle black."

This time her lips parted when she laughed, and the sound came forth like rushing water. "I suppose you're right."

She withdrew the damp cloth, and he felt a dry one replace it.

"Are you alright to look at it?" she asked him.

He looked at her incredulously.

"I don't mean to insult you! I could name half a dozen warriors in this village who put on a brave face but swoon when they see their own blood. I only want you to see how lucky you got."

Stoick sighed and turned to look at his arm. Now that it was cleaner, it didn't look half as gruesome, but he could also see just how deep the gash went. Valka rolled up her own sleeve and touched her slender arm to illustrate as she explained his injury to him.

"Now, this slice just missed all these lovely tendons and blood vessels here in your forearm. Just an inch over and you might not have made it all the way here before you lost consciousness. The fact that you're so muscular helps and hurts you. On the one hand, you've got so much substance to your limb, it takes a lot of pressure to get to all the good stuff. On the other hand, more muscle means more blood flowing into the area, so it makes a real mess when you get cut. It's a wash, really. But obviously neither Freyja nor Odin wanted you just yet."

He stared at her wonderingly. Her tone was so matter-of-fact, so sure. She had a ready mind, obviously, and a tongue that could keep up. She stared back at him until he let his gaze drop, embarrassed, to their arms, side by side. Hers was strong and fine next his own great solid tree branch.

"Thank you," he murmured.

"Don't thank me just yet." She let out a heavy sigh. "Let me get you another ale."

She stood and refilled his cup.

From the corner where the keg stood, she asked, "Do you want some leather to bite down on? Or would you rather be able to yell?"

"Actually, I think the talking helps, if it's all the same to you."

"If you say so," she shrugged, handing him the mug carefully. He downed it again as she threaded her needle.

"Don't watch this," she instructed him solemnly.

Stoick let out a cry as he felt the fine poke and push of the needle in his skin, and his eyes began to water. He decided that now would be an excellent time to start talking.

"How old are you, exactly?" he said, a little more loudly than was

appropriate.

"Are you questioning my qualifications?" she shot back.

"No! Only wondering."

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen?!"

"I know," she smiled, "Practically an old maid, right?"

Stoick backtracked quickly. "That's not what I meant at all. You just have thisâ€"mnn!..quality. You look young, but you speak with suchâ€"ah!â€"authority." His own speech was punctuated by grunts and groans as her needle wove back and forth.

"And how old are you, now?" she asked.

"Twenty-seven."

"Ah, then I could say the opposite of you. You're older, but you speak like a teenager with an attitude problem." Valka grinned up at him through dark lashes, and he couldn't help but chuckle a bit through gritted teeth. Her eyes glowed with the warmth of the joke, like a friend needling him over a drink.

"How come I never see you in the village?" he asked. "I thought I knew everyone there was to know."

"I'm often grounded," she said disinterestedly.

"What?"

"My father says I have 'a tendency toward insubordination' that I need to be cured of." Stoick laughed again as her voice rumbled in imitation of a middle-aged man.

"Now where could he have gotten that idea?" he teased genially.

She smiled. "So I'm basically always here or at home. Or else everyone _thinks_ I'm here or at home."

"When did you start apprenticing the healer?" Stoick asked.

"Three years back," she said.

"Only three years?" he said, before he could stop himself. "But you're practically an expert!"

"Being constantly grounded has its perks," she mused, "lots of study time being one of them." She patted his palm, and he looked down to see that she was done already.

"Odin's beard," he breathed. "That was fast." He examined the stitches closer, even and taught. "And good."

Valka paid no attention to his praise, but instead went straight to work mixing various herbs into a bowl at a table against the wall. Her hands moved gracefully and purposefully as she worked, her eyes

barely looking to see what she was reaching for. She didn't count or measure, but seemed to know instinctively how much of each ingredient was necessary.

"I'll bet you're a fantastic cook," Stoick remarked.

She stopped suddenly, and looked over her shoulder at him with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. "You'd lose that bet." In a flash, she had turned back to her work, and Stoick could hear the grinding of mortar and pestle. The sound set his teeth on edge.

"You can't take a compliment, can you?" he reproved.

"Not one I don't earn. You've never tasted my cooking, and gods willing, you'll never have to." Valka took her seat again with a bowl and a roll of fresh bandages, and immediately began to apply the viscous substance to his sewn-up wound. He expected it to sting again, but found the mixture rather pleasant and cooling on his sore skin. "Medicine doesn't have to look pretty or taste good," she went on, "it only has to work. And my medicines always work." It wasn't bragging, Stoick noted; it was only plainspoken truth. She began to cover the wound with the bandage, wrapping far more evenly than he ever could. "The other stuff, I'm not so good at."

They sat in silence for a few moments as she finished the bandage off. The sky was tinged pink with the early dawn, and some lark began to vocalize in the woods. Stoick watched Valka's face relax as her concentration ebbed. She looked up at him with a smile.

"Now," she said, "was that so bad?"

He only shook his head.

She patted his hand once more before she swept away her things and set to straightening up.

"Don't get those stitches wet," she instructed, "and you can take the bandages off in three days. Come back and see me in ten days and I'll take them out." She left out a breath, and said, "It'll scar, I'm sorry to say."

"Well," Stoick conceded, "at least I'll have a good story to tell about the stubborn, sarcastic, scrawny girl who sewed me up."

Valka's eyebrows shot up in offense. "Girl?"

He couldn't help but laugh. "Woman, then." She smiled back, but her eyes betrayed a bit of sadness.

"It was a Monstrous Nightmare, wasn't it? Got you with its hook?"

"Yes."

"And did it get away?"

Stoick looked at his feet. "Yes."

"Hey," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "So did you."

He smiled at her again. "Thank you. And I'm sorry. F-for everything."

His uncharacteristic stammer struck Valka more deeply than she expected. "Yeah, me too."

Stoick walked out without another word.

As he headed up the hill towards his family home, he couldn't help but look back at the healer's lodge. A figure burst out the back and high-tailed it into the woods. He wanted to follow, but the tasks he knew awaited him forced him to continue the climb. For a few beautiful moments, all that responsibility had seemed to disappear completely.

Ten days was going to be a long time to wait.

* * *

><p>Please review, favorite, and follow to get email updates!

2. Follow the Leader

A/N: I'm excited to see that this story has been followed and favorited! I hope that this chapter doesn't make you all disappear... :)

Credit goes to the wonderful Dyanne Hellen Sotobod for answering my Viking culture questions on her Tumblr. Her responses gave this chapter direction.

* * *

><p>Chapter 2: Follow the Leader

Valka was milling about the Healer's lodge, hanging up bundles of herbs to dry, dusting off bottles and jars in between sips of tea. Her mistress was off assisting in a particularly difficult delivery that afternoon, and the young apprentice had begged to come along, but to no avail. The Healer told her that no woman had any business helping with a birth until she herself had gone through it, and left her with a list of chores to get through in her absence. Valka was almost finished, though, and boredom was setting in. She heard a far-off noise coming from the woods, like some spirit was calling her into the dense treeline. If she slipped out for an hour, surely no one would noticeâ€¦|

"Knock, knock?"

She was startled out of her near-trance by a deep, genial voice at the doorway, and turned to see a mountain of a man whose red beard was growing in nicely. She had forgotten Stoick was due to come back today.

"Ah, I see we're asking for permission to enter this time!" Valka greeted him. "My, how quickly things change."

"Your sense of humor certainly hasn't," he replied with a smile.

"I wouldn't count on that ever happening." She pulled up the same bench he had sat on ten days prior. "Please, have a seat. Let's get those stitches out of your arm so you look a little less like a rag doll."

He sat down, chuckling, and Valka thought to herself how different he was now compared to when he stood by his father's side as the aging chief addressed his tribe at feasts and ceremonies. His heir was dutiful and aloof, his countenance as unchanging as those of the stone icons that guarded the entrance to the Meade Hall. But this young man laughed at her jokes and took her teasing in stride. She saw his cares lift from his shoulders in the warm light that streamed in through the open windows, and he was a boy once more, wanting nothing more than someone to talk with.

She much preferred the lively boy to the distant man.

"Can I get you some ale?" she asked, collecting her tools.

"Ale? Is this going to hurt too?" Stoick asked, bemused.

"Oh, no, it's like plucking hair. I've just been trying to improve my bedside manner," she responded with a gleam in her eye. "I've just made some tea, and I have water as well."

"Tea sounds lovely, thanks," he said through a laugh. "So you have changed a bit, then."

"I've learned a few new tricks." Valka poured him a cup and handed it to him before taking her seat and setting to work. He sipped gingerly at the hot liquid. "This has healed up nicely," she remarked. "You obviously listened."

"I make it a point to heed experts' advice," he said, "although it made for a hilarious wash day, let me tell you!"

She stopped clipping the threads for a moment to look up at him and laugh, enjoying the mental image of the large chief-to-be attempting to maneuver in the tub without his dominant arm. Stoick smiled, and she thought for a moment that such a wide grin should surely crack a face so unused to the expression.

"You know, Gobber was particularly impressed with your work," Stoick said offhandedly. "I showed him the other day when I went to get my hammer rebalanced. He said he knew you."

"Oh, yes, he's in here every few weeks or so to get some balm for his stumps. They ache particularly badly when rough weather hits. He's a good man - a great man, bearing it all like he does. He barely complains. Just tells me how badly it hurts and where, so I can treat him."

Stoick sipped his tea quietly for a moment, and Valka could feel him working up to something.

"Shame that he's still single at his age, a man like that," he finally said.

The comment struck her as pointed, but she shrugged and continued to remove the sutures as she spoke. "Well, I expect he's got a lot to deal with. Between relearning how to do everything on new limbs...and the forge to tend to...not to mention all those different hand attachments he's got to make for every conceivable task! I can't imagine worrying about marriage negotiations on top of all that." She ran her fingers down his arm along the fresh scar tissue, pink and tender. "There you go, all finished." She gathered the scraps and tidied up quickly, hoping that Stoick would drop this particular topic of conversation.

She had no such luck.

"There's not anything...going on with you two, is there?"

Valka choked on a laugh. "You mean - me and Gobber? Frigg and Freyja, no!"

Stoick backtracked, flustered. "I don't mean - only when I mentioned you, he got all pale and scared-looking."

She scowled at him. "I'm a pretty scary person, Stoick."

"No, you're not," he said. "Wild and blunt and unpredictable, yes, but not scary!"

"All I'm saying," Valka continued, exasperated, "is that I rub some people the wrong way, as you well know! I've tried to be friendly to him, but...I probably..." She ran her hand over her loosening braids as she thought. "I don't know why he's scared of me! It's not like - !"

"You know, don't you?"

She met his eyes, and his gaze went right through her. That joking boy was gone. Here was the man who would be chief.

When Valka finally found her voice, she stuttered over her answer. "I-I don't know what you're..."

"Yes, you do." He rose. His voice was firm, but quiet. He had the uncanny ability to make a person listen to him without shouting. It unnerved her deeply. "How long have you known?"

Her shoulders dropped in defeat. "Two months now."

Stoick sighed gustily.

"I haven't told anyone," Valka added quickly.

He glanced at the open door and windows. "Shut those." She obeyed without question (uncharacteristically) before turning to him reluctantly.

"Are we alone here?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"How did you find out? Did he tell you?"

She rolled her eyes. "I hope you think better of your friend than that, Stoick. He's not stupid. Look, I didn't see them _do_ anything, they were just - "

"Wait!" he interrupted, his eyes wild. "You mean he's actually gone and..." He was obviously having trouble keeping his voice low.

"I can't say for sure!" Valka hissed at him, wishing for all the world that she had simply lied and told Stoick she had a crush on his best friend.

"Tell me what happened."

Buying time to gather her thoughts, she took both their cups to the hearth and poured more tea. When she went to give it to him, she saw his hands were shaking, and she put it on the bench instead, pretending not to notice. She sat down on her stool once more, and he followed suit.

"At the start of spring," she said, "when the delegation from Hopeless was here for a month to discuss the renewal of the treaty, I was under house arrest, as usual, but I wasn't at home. I was walking in the woods, going to the...the place I usually go to when I don't want to be found. I heard a voice, and I was worried maybe my father had come looking for me, so I hid behind a tree and watched.

"Gobber was there, smiling, talking to someone I couldn't see. I peeked a bit further around the trunk and I saw it was one of the visiting delegates - I don't know his name. I stepped on a twig and that got their attention, so they both looked around.

"He saw me, but apparently his companion didn't. I heard him say something about game wandering through the forest. I hid there until they left."

She looked at Stoick to see if he would say anything, but his bushy brows were furrowed in concentration, listening and processing. She continued, staring into her teacup.

"I didn't think too much of it at first, to be honest. The only reason I hid was because I didn't want to get in trouble for leaving the house. But the next day he came in here for some burn ointment, acting too casual. My mistress was here clattering about, too, so everything he said was...encoded. He told me it was nice seeing me in the woods while he gave the delegate a tour of Berk's beautiful forest. Asked if I often spend time out there, and do I ever bring anyone along. It was clear what he meant by all of it."

"What did you tell him?" The deep voice shook her. She straightened her spine.

"That I do go often, but always alone; that I was glad to have seen him too; that I hoped our guest enjoyed the tour, but of course he couldn't fail to admire the forest." She said all this plainly, without any inflection indicating a cruel double-meaning, just as she had said it to Gobber. "I knew he wouldn't be asking me all this if he weren't worried. So I told him I'd write down the instructions for the ointment so he'd remember. At the bottom of the paper, I just scribbled, 'It's alright.'"

Stoick wiped at the perspiration on his forehead. "If only it were."

Valka stood and took his still-full teacup from his hand, making sure he looked her in the eye. "And why shouldn't it be?"

"Because he's gone and done the one thing I hoped he'd never do: he proved it. He never told me, but I saw it all: the stolen glances and sad looks. I thought he could suffer this silently, the way he bore losing half his limbs in a month. Obviously I was wrong. If this comes out, he'll be labeled a traitor to our people - a dishonorable coward."

"Gobber? A coward?" she said disbelievingly. "You said it yourself, Stoick, the man lost an arm and within weeks he was out fighting again! He's the bravest man to walk this island on two feet or one. And no one can say that he is without honor after all of that."

"They will, no matter what he's done, especially if that man comes back and accuses Gobber of forcing himself on him! People are already starting to talk, Valka!" Stoick stood and paced, practically growling in frustration. "He's thirty-three, for Thor's sake. Even with all the loss he's had to deal with, he has a responsibility to help keep the tribe going after he's gone."

"Is that it?" She sneered. "You're upset because your friend hasn't sired a gaggle of little Gobbers? Because if I recall, you have a similar responsibility - a pressing burden that you have yet to take up, and you're not getting any younger." She stepped toward him. "The whole village talks about it, and I'm willing to bet you hear it at least twice a day from your father: 'When is Stoick finally going to bind himself to some neighboring chief's daughter with a big dowry and even bigger hips - all the better to pop out those giant Haddock babies!'"

"You have no right to speak to me that way!" he blasted at her. She staggered back, the force of his words was so great, but her eyes did not leave his as his words echoed off the walls. Only when the reverberations stopped did she open her mouth again.

"I'm sorry for how I spoke," Valka said quietly, "but not for speaking. I have a responsibility. To remain silent when the words are hammering in my throat would make me a coward. To withhold knowledge that could help you make a better choice would make me a traitor. To deny what I know in my heart to be true because it would be more difficult to affirm it would be dishonorable. Alone, any one of those things would be shameful, but together..." She sighed, eyes dropping to her feet. "It would make me an outlaw."

When she felt a massive hand on her shoulder, she looked up.

"You are right," he muttered, "but you'd have gotten a lot further a lot faster if you'd started with that pretty speech instead of bringing all that up."

Relieved, she let out a halting laugh. "Tact has never been my strong suit."

Stoick sat down, laughing lightly and shaking his head. He still

looked troubled, though. "What am I going to do with him, Valka?"

"Well, the way I see it," she said, taking what small bit of bench was left over, "you have two options. First, you marry him off as fast as you can to some sweet, understanding, trustworthy lady." Stoick looked at her with surprise in his wide eyes, and she looked back at him incredulously. "Did you think I was volunteering?"

He stammered, trying to recover what was left of his dignity. "Oh, no - but, I mean - if you were to - "

"Ragnarok will come first." She fixed him with an icy stare.

"Of course," he said, clearing his throat.

Valka waved him off. "All this," she continued, "would make one, if not two people unhappy, just to circumvent a whole bunch of trouble that you think might, maybe, possibly, someday happen." Stoick couldn't help but nod his understanding. "And your other option is to go to his house tonight and tell him you know."

Stoick looked panicked.

"Tell him that you know, and that it's alright. You don't have to get all mushy. Just remind him that you're his friend and you'll stand by him."

Valka looked to him, and while he was calmer than he had been, his brow was still creased with concentration.

He let out a labored breath. "All this would be fine if I weren't set to become chief. If it gets out that I've been protecting him, that I've been acting against something that everyone believes...I mean, there could be an uprising. Every decision I've ever made suddenly gets called into question. Now I'm the traitor."

"You're only a traitor if you let your friend suffer to save your own skin."

"You really think they'll see it that way?"

Her expression was amused. "You underestimate yourself. People listen to you, and given enough time and evidence, they can change their minds. Sometimes all it takes is one person doing something very brave and completely insane for it to happen. I can think of no man better suited for the task." Stoick blushed, turning his whole head into one fiery red blotch.

"Thank you, Valka."

"Don't thank me just yet. It will take time. And work. But if you just keep leading by example, I think they'll come to understand."

"Still...thank you."

They sat quietly for a moment. The lodge was dim with all the windows shut, but the light from the fire made Stoick's beard and hair almost glow as if the young man gave off light himself: his own internal

fire shining through. She thought about how her words were the spark that lit it, and she couldn't help the small smile that passed over her lips.

Finally, she rose to open the windows. The color that streamed in was no longer golden but rosy. She would be expected at home now, she thought reluctantly. There was no chance of her sneaking off to her hideaway today.

"I have to go," she said, not so much to her companion as to herself, reminding her unruly heart that it could not always get its way.

"I - I have to as well," he echoed, and she could have sworn she heard the same regret in his tone. The floorboards groaned under his footfalls as he made his way to the door.

"Can I walk you home?" he asked.

"Surely you have better things to do," she rebuked.

"I can't think of any at the moment."

With a smirk at his flattery, she took up her satchel from the hook on the wall and slung the strap across her chest. He opened the door for her and inclined his head with a smile.

"Lead the way."

* * *

><p>Thank you in advance for your reviews! I will take all the constructive criticism I can get.

**Bonus points go to reviewers who can point out any "echoes" of the films in the story. I include many intentionally, and I'm sure there are more that sneak in from my subconscious. **

3. Promises, Promises

A/N: I want to thank everyone who has read, favorited, and reviewed the story. Special shout-outs to HappilyBlue, NightfuryFriend, and rachel . opperman . 7 for your thoughtful comments and/or demands for updates. It's nice to be missed when I don't update soon!

Speaking of which, I apologize for the delay in posting this chapter. These past two weeks has been terribly busy for me. Thank you to those who are hanging in there!

* * *

><p>Chapter 3: Promises, Promises

Stoick the Vast had never felt more out of shape in his life.

He was by no means a weak man, but his massive frame favored brute strength over graceful speed. And strength was not going to help him keep up with the light elf who practically flew ahead of him, changing direction with otherworldly agility.

"Youâ€¦" he panted, "mustâ€¦come this wayâ€¦a lot, huh?"

"You could say that," she called over her shoulder. "Come on! We haven't much time!"

Gods, why had he agreed to this?

When he had walked Valka home after she took out his stitches, he had been surprised when she stopped at the door of the Jorgenson lodge.

"You're Windburn and Valgard's daughter?" He knew of their son, but now he vaguely remembered them presenting a baby girl to officially be welcomed into the tribe. He'd only been ten at the time, though, far too young to understand just how vital every new life was to sustaining the village, and certainly too young to care about babies _or_ girls.

"Yes," she said, reluctantly, "although they'd never own to it outright."

He couldn't help but laugh a bit at what he thought was a joke, but stopped when he saw the solemn look on her face. "Why not?"

It was her turn to laugh now. "C'mon, Stoick, I'm not exactly what you'd call the perfect child. I told you, they're constantly confining me to my room for some offense or other."

"But you don't always stay there," he said. "You mentioned that. Just what is so important that you can't stay put when your parents tell you to?"

Valka opened her mouth, and he could feel the scathing retort coming, but she stopped just short of it. Her face softened.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I do."

She arched her brow at him. "Are you serious?"

"Yes!" Now the suspense was killing him

A smile bloomed across her face like no smile he'd ever seen before. "Then meet me here tomorrow, right at dawn."

Stoick's brain immediately hummed with thoughts of everything he had to do tomorrow, and he knew that she could tell.

"It won't take too long," she added. "You'll be back in time to grab some breakfast in the Meade Hall. But you have to meet me just as day's breaking."

The sight of her holding her breath in anticipation tugged at his chest.

"I promise," he said solemnly.

"Alright!" she said, obviously unable to contain her delight. "I'll see you out here in the morning. And wear something you don't mind

getting dirty." And with that, she retreated into the lodge.

Stoick was left there wondering just what he'd gotten himself into.

* * *

><p>Despite his utter confusion, he could barely sleep for anticipation. This young woman was an absolute puzzle to him. He knew no one so brash and irresponsible, yet so caring and gentle. She didn't treat him with any of the distant respect the other villagers paid him as son of the chief, but it didn't upset him. Instead, it made him relax into her easy company. They had only spoken twice, but he thought of her like an old friend.<p>

This thought made him sit bolt upright in his bed. She was most certainly not an old friend; she was a young friend - a very young friend. If his father knew that he was taking her out of the village alone, he'd tan his hide, then give him the lecture of his life. He wouldn't object to Stoick's taking an interest in a woman â€" on the contrary, he'd be thrilled - but he sure as Hel would object to his son's behavior. There were traditions to follow and boundaries to observe. He'd need to get Valka's approval, and talk to her father; then he would have to court her, and they would need chaperones wherever they went, and then there were all the contract negotiations -

Stoick shook his head to rid it of the thoughts. They had known each other for ten days, and that was surely too soon to know if they wereâ€|compatible. He wasn't ready to go to all that trouble yet. Yes, she was intelligent and beautiful and spirited, but this could all be a passing infatuation. The only way to know for sure was to spend more time with herâ€|

And that was it - the justification he needed! He would go with her tomorrow morning. He would be a perfect, upright gentleman. He would not let his eyes wander. He would not touch her. He would not say anything that could be construed as romantic. They would spend time together, and he would decide after thorough deliberation whether this relationship was worth pursuing.

He lay back down, beaming at what a mature, trustworthy, smart adult he was, and tried to get some rest.

* * *

><p>He barely slept, so afraid was he of breaking his promise to meet her. He had merely lain for hours with his head turned towards the open window. As soon as the horizon tinged pink he was up, throwing on an old tunic and leggings that had been mended too many times, and sliding his feet into a large, scuffed pair of boots. As subtly as possible, he left his house and crept down the hill into the quiet village.<p>

When he arrived at the house, he was surprised that Valka wasn't already standing outside. He looked around to see if she was hiding, and started when a noise sounded from the roof.

"Psst!"

She was seated on the ledge of a upper window, and before he knew it, she had pushed herself out and slid almost noiselessly down the curved side of the building, landing with a dramatic curtsy and a comically pompous greeting.

"It is an honor to have you accompany me, m'lord." She looked up at him with an impish grin.

Odin, this was going to be more difficult than he thought.

"We need to hurry," she whispered. "Try to keep up!" And with that, she sprang into a run and bolted for the forest.

The run was difficult for Stoick, to say the least. Even more difficult, though, was trying to keep his mind on the path and off of the body in front of him: swinging braids bouncing against a lean back, long legs and muscled " No, that was exactly what he was not supposed to do! He tried to focus instead on the tree roots and fallen logs jutting into the path that, incidentally, seemed to be intent on tripping him up. His guide, however, had no trouble leaping over every obstacle, occasionally jumping for a tree branch and swinging over an obstruction when it suited her.

He soon realized that they were heading uphill - no wonder he was out of breath.

"Just how long," he huffed, "are we going to keep running?"

"It's just ahead!" she called.

He uttered a short prayer of thanks.

When Valka stopped, it was so sudden that Stoick collided with her. He quickly thrust out a hand and grabbed her arm to steady her.

"Whoa!" she exclaimed good-naturedly. "Good catch." She patted his hand that still gripped her bicep firmly, and he withdrew it like he had been burned.

So much for not touching her.

Valka didn't seem to notice his hasty reaction, though. She had turned eastward and was gazing out as though entranced. Stoick took in the rocky outcropping atop which they now stood. It jutted up and above the treeline, affording an unobstructed view of the nascent sunrise. As far as he could see, there was only pink, blue, and violet. The reflection of color in the water blurred sea and sky together so that the seastacks looked like floating mountains high in the clouds.

He allowed himself to get lost in the view for the gods knew how long, only coming back to himself at the sound of her voice.

"Do you like it?" she asked quietly, as if she were afraid to break the peaceful spell.

He turned to her. Her eyes were wide, full of a strange mix of hope and fear. She seemed to simultaneously reach for his answer and steel herself for disappointment. Stoick wondered how often she had sought

approval, only to be met with indifference or worse.

"I love it."

Valka gasped, a mix of surprise and joy that she obviously tried to stifle, to no avail. A smile lit up her features, gripping his heart and pulling at it.

"You're the first person I've ever brought up here." She looked out at the bleeding colors again as yellow and orange began to tinge the horizon. "You're the first one to ask me where I go."

"You've shown me where," he said gently, "but can you tell me why?"

Valka sighed and ran her hand over her head and down a braid. This must be common for her when she was trying to explain something, he noted.

"Not to put too fine a point on it," she began, "but I'm pretty much a total screw-up." His impulse was to interrupt her, contradict her, but he restrained himself. He listened the way he did when his father sent him to settle minor disputes: attentively and withholding judgement at first.

"My parents had high hopes for me. You know, they're both great warriors, and my mother's fiercely domestic besides. They obviously expected me to be a skilled fighter, or at least a pleasant homemaker who could fetch a good bride price. And I've turned out to be neither. I'm not going to do them any honor in battle, for sure. They want me out of their hair, but I won't get any offers with my temperament, or so they tell me. I don't want to be some cheery little wife, stitching socks by the fire like it's all she was ever meant to do. I mean, I'll do it, given the right situation, but I need something more than that to make me happy."

"And do you know what it is you need?" Stoick prompted.

"I don't know what it is, but I come out here almost every day, watching and wandering and working, trying to figure it out."

"Well, you have Healing. And you've got a real gift for that."

"Oh, that..." she said, pulling hard on a braid now, looking at the ground like it was the most interesting thing in Midgard. "That was a total accident, my apprenticeship."

"What do you mean?" Stoick asked.

"I...I broke my arm the day before I was set to begin training." Her voice was low, and she looked ashamed. Her cheek was pale. "I was climbing a tree, and I...slipped. I stuck out my right arm to break my fall. It hurt like Hel, and I had to walk half a league back to my house. It wasn't too bad, but it was bad enough that I couldn't hold a weapon for two months. So in the meantime I started learning under Ragna. I had to find a way to make myself useful in a fight." She sighed. "Stupid, really."

This time, Stoick couldn't stop himself from laying a hand on her arm. "Not stupid. It was meant to be. The Norns put you where your

talents were needed."

She still didn't look at him. He found himself longing for that honest grin that had graced her lips only a few minutes prior.

"I know I do good there, and I'm good at it," she said her voice beginning to strain, "but it's not where I feel like I belong. I want to help make things better, and if that's where I can do it right now, then I will do it as best I can. But there's this...emptiness I can't fill. And I can't explain - not to my family, not to you - but being out here just makes it better, at least for a little while."

As she took in a shaky breath, Stoick realized that he was no stranger to emptiness. In all his years of preparing to inherit the chieftom, he had always considered marriage to be just another one of his duties. Of course, it was necessary that he take a bride who could run a good household and bear children. But if he sought a partner on those terms alone, he would have been married years ago to any of the young women on Berk, or even one of the many ladies he had met on voyages and at Things. Still he remained single, though, because it wasn't enough to just fulfill duty, to do his job. The two of them were more alike than he'd thought.

The difference between them, though, was that she was still searching for something that would fill the void, while he believed had found it.

"Valka." She looked up at her name. "You think more than anyone I know."

"Yeah, I know." She shrugged, noncommittally. "More trouble than it's worth."

"No!" he said quickly, and she cocked an eyebrow at him. "I mean, yes, it is a burden to be sure," he admitted, "but it makes you who you are. While everyone else is just blindly doing what they're told, you question everything. You ask why. You challenge me." He took a deep breath, knowing he was about to break his third and final promise to himself that day. "And I don't know if that's what you've been put on this earth to do, but I want you to keep challenging me. Please, Valka."

Her eyes were full of...something. It looked like surprise and terror grappling with gratitude and understanding. He wasn't sure what he'd call it, but he knew she caught his meaning completely. Her lips parted, but no sound escaped. Every nerve in his body was screaming at him to kiss her, but he needed her answer before he made another move.

And just as she inhaled to make her reply, a distant, inhuman cry echoed from the direction of the water and caught their attention. Both their heads snapped immediately toward the noise, and its source was clearly visible.

Dragons.

Two of them stood on a stack rising out of the water half a mile from the shore. Stoick's mind immediately entered battle mode, analyzing their distance from the beasts, their lack of weaponry, their

surroundings and possible hiding places. They were safe for the time being, but if they were spotted, the devils could have them cornered in a minute or less.

Then Valka took his hand, and he was lost to everything but her.

"Look, Stoick."

He squinted out into the brightening sky to see what the Nadders were doing. They were absorbed in some kind of...dance. There was a great deal of crooning, flapping, and shifting from one foot to the other going on. One dragon would make a move, like extending a wing or flaring the darts on its tail, and the other would mirror it back. Then the mirroring dragon would make a different motion, which its partner would reciprocate. This went on for a few minutes, until they slowly approached each other and tentatively began to nuzzle snout-to-snout.

"Are they...is that..." Stoick couldn't find the words. The earnest contact between the two made him forget for a moment that the end product of this ritual would be more dragons trying to make off with their food stores.

"I've only seen a few dragons out here before, but...I've never seen that." She looked at him and then down at their hands. He thought for sure that she would pull away, but her delicate fingers only clutched him tighter. She looked up again as the sound of wingbeats signaled the pair's departure, but her gaze returned to him. "Seems so easy."

"Val - "

"Don't ask me to challenge you unless you mean it, Stoick," she said firmly. "Because I will challenge you to within an inch of your life. I've had a lot of practice. You think you want it now, but you'll be retreating before you know it."

He searched her eyes for some hint of humor. He found none.

"I mean it." He removed his hand from hers and extended it to shake. She grasped it firmly. "But," he added, his eyes gleaming, "I want you to promise me that you will be only as exasperating as you are. I know you won't go easy on me, but I need to know that you won't purposefully try to get rid of me by torturing me with petty arguments."

Her lips were fixed in a smirk. "Seems fair. And what will you promise me in return?"

A hundred answers tried to force their way out at once: home, freedom, acceptance, tenderness, protection, love. But all of these were too much, he knew, for a young woman so used to loneliness and solitude. They'd scare her off like a skittish bird and she'd be gone before he could blink.

"Friendship."

The smile made her heart-shaped face stretch in that funny way - strange and lovely.

"Deal." Her small but strong hand shook his with finality.

The sun hit her hair like rose gold and - _Oh, gods_, he thought, _the sun!_

"I've got to go," Stoick said urgently, the morning light suddenly hitting his senses. He had left no note for his father, and he would surely wonder where he'd gone off too.

"Me too." If he wasn't mistaken, there was a tinge of regret in her tone. "Chores to get to. I can show you the way back."

"That works for me."

She nodded, and they headed back into the woods side-by-side. Before they made their way onto the worn trail, though, Stoick had something more to ask her.

"Val?"

"Hmm?"

"Can we walk this time?"

* * *

><p>Thank you all for reading! Please leave a review if you enjoyed it (or if you didn't). I greatly appreciate constructive feedback. I will do my best to get the next chapter up in a week. Until then, best wishes!

4. Rainy Night

A/N: Happy Ficsgiving, everyone!

* * *

><p>Chapter 4: Rainy Night
**

There was once a time when a book was Valka's favorite companion. But tonight, stuck in her room with only the words on the page in front of her, she yearned for human company.

Autumn rain fell outside, the pattering on the roof reminding her that escape was not an option. Although she and Stoick tried to meet every morning and evening, they had agreed that in the event of inclement weather, they should not risk it.

"I just think it would look..." Stoick had hemmed and hawed one day when it started drizzling as they set off for their usual sunrise spot.

"Bad?" Valka had supplied. "Suspicious? If we both showed up sopping wet before breakfast?"

"Not that we're doing anything to warrant suspicion!" he clarified.

"But with you being who you are?"

"Exactly." He smiled that relieved, grateful smile. He gave it to her whenever she showed she understood him, and she treasured each one, for it meant he understood her too. They turned back reluctantly and each retreated quietly back into their respective homes. As much as they valued their mutual understanding, they loved their privacy.

Her attachment to the stubborn young man was such a foreign feeling, distracting and disconcerting at times. Even now, she could barely focus on her reading; every sentence reminded her of something she wanted to tell him. The last time she had called someone a friend had been as a child, so long ago she could scarcely remember it. She certainly didn't recall friendship being so...bewildering. Valka liked facts and clarity, organization and procedure, but now she found that she was never quite so happy as when she was confounded by this man's presence.

A knock at her door brought her wandering brain back to her body. She snapped her book shut and sat up on her bed.

"Come in!"

A face remarkably like hers graced the doorway: same wavy auburn hair, same blue-green eyes, same slim nose. But where Valka's body was broad at the shoulders, her mother's was wider at the hips, a testament to her maternity. She occasionally assured her daughter that her own hips would widen when she was with child, that she had nothing to fear from childbirth (Valka had to keep from pointing out that, given her dearth of suitors, the size of her hips would never become an issue).

"I thought you could use a little treat," Valgard whispered cheerily, holding up a small wooden plate with a honeyed pastry upon it. Her small mouth was cocked in a mischievous smile as she sat on the bed beside her daughter. "Don't tell your father. We only had one left over, and he swipes enough of 'em when he thinks I can't see."

"Thanks," Valka replied tentatively, taking the plate from her mother's outstretched hand. This was far from usual behavior, and she couldn't help but eye her mother as she nibbled a corner of the dessert. "What's the occasion?"

Most nights, Valka was sent straight to her room after supper with instructions to stay there, "or else." If she refrained from climbing out of her window, she was often treated to a lecture on obedience and responsibility from one or both of her parents before bed, not sweets. The lectures had been few and far-between these past two months though, and although she had been sneaking out even more than normal, she couldn't recall the last time she'd been punished. This uncharacteristic leniency had made Valka wary of her mother and father. Were they lulling her into a false sense of security, waiting until her guard was down to dole out some terrible consequence? And if so, what could her crime possibly be?

Her mother shrugged, taking a piece of Valka's long, loose hair and plaiting it absently. "Can't a mother check in on her daughter? Have a little girl talk?"

Valka choked on her bite of pastry. Her mum didn't _do_ girl talk. But she shrugged right back and decided to play it as cool as possible. "Sure."

"So...what's new with you?"

"Well..." Valka started, "Ragna's been teaching me some really interesting stuff about emergency burn care."

"And?"

"And she said she'd let me go out in the field during the next raid to practice." Gods, she hoped she sounded calm.

"_And_?"

"And this tunic's wearing out. I've been thinking of making a new-"

"_Dammit_, Valka, when were you going to tell me Stoick's been courting you?!" Her mum was practically shaking, her mouth stretched into a smile so wide it threatened to cut her face in two.

In that moment, Valka would have preferred to be punished.

"W-What?"

Valgard scooted closer to her. "That man's a lot of things, but dainty's not one of them. I hear him tromping past the house every morning at dawn, loud as a Gronckle, on his way to pick you up! You'd just better be thankful your father is a heavy sleeper, because he'd be none too pleased that Stoick didn't come 'round to ask him for permission first."

Panicking, Valka tried to find the words to explain. "But we're just-"

"Oh, you've got nothing to fear from me! I know, a girl just needs to have some things to herself. A little adventure, the thrill of the risk! You've got to have a taste of it before you settle down. Don't worry, I'll act surprised when he comes by with an offer. _Oh!_" _Her hands clapped on either cheek. "I can't wait to see the look on Windburn's face! I've prayed for ages that someone would accept you, but never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined it'd be Stoick! Frigg was more generous than I hoped."

Valka was in shock. Her mother had never spoken of her with such joy, but neither had her exasperation ever been so apparent. Did her parents really think she was so intolerable?

Valgard's tone turned serious. "Now I hope you haven't gone further than kissing, because chief's son or not, your father is going to tan your hide if you get pregnant by him now. After the handsal, I'll ask Ragna for some herbs for you. If you ask, rumors'll spread like wildfire. Then you can fool around a bit, and if there's an accident, we can just move up the-"

"Mum, we're _just_ _friends_!" Valka could feel her cheeks burning

with embarrassment.

As silence flooded the space between them, confusion, disappointment, and ire all passed over her mother's expressive face, combining into a muddled sort of expression.

"You can't be." Valgard uttered quietly.

"I'm serious, Mum. We've just been hanging out. No courting or..." she had to force herself to say the word, "..._kissing_, or anything else!"

_"No, Valka, I mean you _cannot_ be friends."

Valka cocked an eyebrow. She was used to being told she couldn't do something and then promptly doing it. "Why not?"

"He's twenty-seven." Her mother's eyes bored into hers. "He's going to be chief. He's not married. Either he's looking to make you his wife, or you're just an object of infatuation, distracting him from finding a proper bride like he's supposed to." _Proper _landed like a hard punch in Valka's gut. "Are you leading him on? Does he think you love him, or does he just want the romp without any of the responsibility?"

"Neither!" Valka exclaimed, finally rising from the bed and shaking out the braid her mother had done. "We are just two people who happen to have a lot in common. We talk about everything under the sun. He asks for my advice. He listens to me, which is more than I can say for you and Dad."

"Hush!" The woman hissed at her through clenched teeth, trying to keep their argument quiet. Valka brushed her off.

"What makes you so sure he wants me?"

Her mother rolled her eyes. "Dear, no man gets out of bed before dawn for just a friend. It's only love or lust that makes him beat the birds to waking."

Memories of countless mornings and evenings rushed through Valka's mind. Sweet smiles shared in private moments. Secret fears and doubts exchanged beneath the roar of wind over the cliffs. Soft pledges to meet the next day and do it all again.

Her mouth went dry.

"I'm sure he'd...still be my friend if I told him that's all I wanted," she protested haltingly. "He'd find someone else and-and everything would be fine."

Her mother let out a long-suffering sigh. "That's not how it works, dear."

"So he can't be my friend and be wed?" Valka asked softly. "Is that it?"

Valgard's expression softened. In an uncharacteristically tender move, she went to her daughter and smoothed a piece of hair behind her ear. "No wife would want her husband running around with such a

young, pretty, wild girl, Valka. It's just not done."

The young woman's eyes burned. Wild, her mother had called her, but Valka knew what she really meant: disobedient, flighty, stubborn, quick-tempered. Completely unsuited for him. A chief's wife would stay quiet, do her duty, and be content. She wouldn't run off to the woods just because she felt like it. She wouldn't question everything she was told. And above all else, she wouldn't distract her chief from his responsibilities with sunrises and hikes and silly conversations.

"I'll admit," Valgard said softly. "It would do my heart good to see you married, especially to him. But marrying Stoick is like marrying all of Berk. The way you take care of him will in turn affect his ability to lead and take care of the village. You have to ask yourself if you can commit to that responsibility."

Valka could hardly breathe. The idea of taking up that load terrified her-serving the village she could find no place in. But then again, so did the thought of anyone else standing at his side.

Her mother laid a hand on her shoulder, and Valka looked up at her.

"I think you know what you have to do."

Closing her eyes, the girl nodded.

* * *

><p>Stoick had been staring into the fire for so long, his eyes ached. The warmth of the house did little to comfort him, even he listened to the cool wind blow the rain against the chief's house. Standing apart from the rest of the village, the large hall was unguarded from the droplets that flew horizontally. As foolish as he knew it was, he thought how he would much rather brave the rain to meet Valka than stay dry inside, but he had an idea of how he could use their time apart this evening to make their reunion sweeter.<p>

His musings were interrupted by the clatter of the door and his father's heavy footsteps. Rain splashed off of Squidface the Terrible's heavy cloak and beard as he shook like a great dog to dry himself, grunting and groaning in discomfort. Stoick sprang to his feet and filled two mugs from a cask of ale, placing them down on the table before the chief and taking his seat, waiting patiently for his father to remove his mantle and join him.

"Well, this is quite the welcome!" the old chief said, grinning through his massive grey-streaked beard. "Have you done something wrong I should know about?"

"Oh, no!" Stoick said. "I just thought I'd make us both...comfortable. Quite a storm, huh?"

Squidface sat down in his heavily carved chair. "At least it's not snow." He raised his mug to his son and took a deep drink.

All of a sudden, faced with the prospect of talking to his father, Stoick's confident resolve left him.

"I was wondering, Father-that is, if you're not too tired, I wanted to, uh, ask you...ask you..."

The chief was in decent spirits, but far from patient. "Oh, for Thor's sake, son, spit it out!"

Stoick inhaled deeply to steady his voice. "I want your blessing to seek the hand of a young woman."

And before he knew what was happening, Stoick was being enveloped by muscular arms and moist wool.

"Well, it's about damn time!" his father shouted, laughing like a child on Snoggletog. "Oh, gods, I knew something was going on with you, and I was hoping for just this!" He held his son out at arm's length, looking him over with a glow that was more than just the ale. "So, who's the lucky girl?"

"It's, um, Valka. Valka Jorgenson."

Squidface's smile shrank a bit. His brows furrowed. "Really?" His tone was all surprise. "From what her father tells me she..." Stoick could see his father searching for a diplomatic phrasing, "...doesn't get out much. How'd you come to meet her?" The old chief resumed his seat, propping his head on his hand thoughtfully.

"Two months ago, she stitched up that wound on my arm." His right hand moved to touch the place that now bore the treasured scar. "She nearly gave me another wound trying to keep me at Ragna's to get it mended instead of running back out to fight." He chuckled a bit at the memory, hoping a casual tone would keep his father's questioning at bay. "I've...spoken to her since, and it seems to me that we'd make a good match."

Squidface sat back in his chair, running his hand over his beard in thought. "Well, she's lovely to see, so it's no wonder she caught your eye. She's young, to be sure. Plenty of time for raising a family with her." He raised his bushy eyebrows meaningfully. and Stoick's cheeks warmed. "Her father says she's headstrong, though. Not exactly the kind to stay at home all day. You sure she's who you want running your household?"

Stoick planted himself and prepared to make his case, logically and thoroughly. "It's about more than who I want in charge of cooking and cleaning, Father. It's about who I want to come home to at the end of the day." That picture tugged the corner of his mouth upward. "She's thoughtful and wise, if blunt. She considers everything so carefully, sees problems from angles I would never have considered. And beyond all that, she lives her own life. She wouldn't sit around moping when my responsibilities keep me out at all hours or away from home. She'd keep herself busy."

He forced his gaze up to his father's, ready to face judgement. But all he saw was quiet joy.

Squidface leaned forward on his chair. "Son, I decided a long time ago that I wouldn't retire until you married. I wanted you and your bride to have some time to yourselves before I thrust that weight upon your shoulders. And I promised your mother, gods rest her, that

I would let you choose your own wife. Your role in this village will allow you little freedom, she said, and she told me the least I could do was allow you to make that decision yourself." His eyes glistened, but his voice never broke. Stoick knew his parents had been matched amiably, but that it had taken time for them to grow to love one another. "And everything you've just told me has proven to me that you are ready not only to take a wife, but to take on the chiefdom."

Stoick was stunned. He had expected his father to give him a smack upside the head and a serious talking-to, to tell him off for his irresponsible choice. To be granted both his father's blessing for his marriage and his inheritance in one night was beyond anything he could have hoped for.

He bowed his head and did his best to keep his voice even. "Thank you, Father. I won't let you down."

"Don't thank me just yet," Squidface laughed a bit. "We'll give it...three months after the wedding until we announce it, shall we? And I'm assuming you'll want to marry this girl as soon as possible?"

"Yes," Stoick said quickly, but then backtracked. "By which I mean-I mean, I can't wait to marry her. Not that we, you know, have to because...because of...circumstances. Because we don't-!"

"For Thor's sake, boy, you'd best get all of these nerves out before you go ask her."

* * *

><p>The next day at dawn, Valka awoke to the skip of pebbles on wood. When she rubbed the sleep from her eyes, her lids felt tender and swollen. She wasn't sure how long she had laid awake, but it had seemed like hours before she had fallen into fitful sleep. She was still in her clothes from yesterday, and she was sure her loose hair was a complete mess, but she heaved her body out of bed and to the window.<p>

When she opened the shutters, she saw him. Red-haired and red-faced in the chill of the autumn morning, his whole head somewhat resembled a ripened berry. Any other day, the sight and thought would have made her smile like he did now, but instead it put a knot in her stomach.

"Good morning, milady!" he called sotto voce. "Enjoying a lie-in? You're going to miss the best part of the day!"

The knot tightened.

"I'll be right down," she whispered back, then grabbed a shawl and her boots and slunk down the stairs.

Tying the thick woolen shawl around her shoulders, Valka stepped out into the cool morning. She couldn't look at Stoick's face, so she settled on his feet instead.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, bending down to try to get a look at her face. "You never oversleep. Are you ill?"

She turned away from his discerning gaze and started walking in their usual direction. "I'm fine. We should get going. It's late."

"You sure you don't need more sleep?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Her walk became a jog, and then a run. She could hear his heavy footfalls behind her. She thought of how once, he struggled to run the whole way without stopping, and now he could catch her with little effort.

She sped up.

By the time she reached the cliff, Valka was out of breath. She knew it would take Stoick a minute to catch up to her, so she fell to her knees and tried to draw air back into her starved lungs. She needed time. She needed to figure out what she was going to say.

When Stoick caught up with her, he was only mildly winded.

"If you wanted to race, you should have told me!" he said cheerily. "It's unfair, you giving yourself a head start, when I'm obviously more in need of one." His gentle laugh rumbled deep in his chest.

"I needed it today."

She could hear the confusion in his voice, though her gaze remained out at the glowing sea. "Do you want to be alone?" She felt him lower to the ground beside her. "Did I do something to offend you? I certainly didn't mean to. Just tell me and I'll make it right. I promise."

Valka brought her eyes to his, and before she could stop herself, her lips crashed against his.

For a moment, time hung suspended in the air. It was like the moment at the height of a jump before the fall began. Then heavy hands moved to her back and tangled themselves in her knotted hair, while her long fingers grasped the front of his tunic. Their mouths parted just as suddenly as they had collided, and she spoke.

"Marry me, Stoick."

His face was unreadable. "What?"

"You heard me," Valka breathed, not daring to look away now. "Do you want to?"

"Of...of course. But..." His hand combed over his hair in an unusually shy way. "_I_ wanted to ask _you_."

Any other day, this would have brought her heart crashing to her feet. But today, she refused to apologize. She merely smiled cockily at Stoick. "Well, I think you'll learn quickly that I tend to run a few paces ahead."

A broad smile cracked his face in two, and his brow came to rest against hers. "I've come to expect that. Dare I ask what brought on

this proposal?"

She forced out a breathy laugh, putting on a haughty air. "It was a test. Either you'd say yes and I'd get what I wanted, or I'd scare you off and find out your intentions weren't so honorable. One way or the other, I win."

Stoick cocked an eyebrow and made to stand. "Well, maybe I don't want to marry a cruel woman who tests me unawares. Maybe I want a docile woman who'll bend over backwards to suit me."

"Oh, come on, Stoick," Valka drawled good-naturedly, "we both know that's not what you want, otherwise you wouldn't be falling so hard for me!"

"Then tell me why you really asked me, or I'll have to go find a woman who'll let me propose to her!" He couldn't hide his smile under the taunting challenge.

"I am perfectly wrong for you!" Her declaration echoed out into the woods behind him. "Last night, I realized I am nothing like the woman you should be marrying. But when I pictured letting you go, letting someone else be your wife..." She let her bravado falter as she stepped back towards him. "It broke my heart." Her hand came up to test the stubble on his cheek. "I love you, Stoick. And I'm too selfish to give you up."

He relaxed into her touch. "Your selfishness might be your best virtue, Val."

"Good," she said. "Because I'm going to ask so many impossible things of you."

"Like what?" he asked through a grin.

She brought her hand to the back of his head and pulled him down so she could have his ear. "Your word. That you won't tell Gobber or your father or anyone we've agreed to become engaged. And that you definitely won't start negotiating the contract with my parents. Not until tomorrow, anyway."

He started to protest and pull away but she kept him in her grasp. "Meet me back here tonight after dinner. Please. I just want one day of knowing you're mine before anyone else does."

She felt him nod, and rewarded him for his assent with another kiss.

"I love you, Stoick."

"I love you, too."

End
file.